

OPERAS AT SALZBURG

'Ariadne,' Rolf Liebermann's 'Penelope' And 'Freischuetz' Revival Are Staged

By HENRY PLEASANTS

SALZBURG.

Good Tunes

IN addition to "Penelope," the new opera by the Swiss composer, Rolf Liebermann, there have been two new productions at this year's Salzburg Festival—Strauss' "Ariadne auf Naxos" and Weber's "Der Freischuetz."

"Ariadne" has been a great success. "Der Freischuetz" a pretty dismal failure. Such has been, at least, the almost unanimous verdict of the critics. That the verdict of the box-office has been otherwise means simply that in Europe, as in America, people like old music better than new, even when the latter is no newer than the already 40-year-old "Ariadne." Needless to add, "Penelope," despite the enormous publicity attendant upon a Salzburg premiere, has been a sorry also-ran at the ticket window.

Of the two revivals, "Der Freischuetz" attracted the greater attention, if only because the conductor was Wilhelm Furtwaengler and the choice of so German an opera so odd for so international a public as Salzburg's.

No Modernizing

That "Der Freischuetz" is a dated piece is indicated by the rarity of its performance outside Germany and Austria. Thus one would have expected some effort to tailor it to modern tastes and techniques, similar to Wieland Wagner's efforts in behalf of his grandfather's music-dramas at Bayreuth. There was nothing of the sort.

Theo Otto's stage sets might well have seemed primitive in Berlin in 1821. Guenther Rennert's stage direction would probably have seemed conventional at any time in the nineteenth century. The only modern touch was the domination of the production by the conductor. This was a modern touch the opera could well have done without.

There is no need to argue that "Der Freischuetz" must necessarily suffer from authoritative musical direction, but Furtwaengler's direction in a naive work of this kind is simply lethal. A fine interpreter of Beethoven and Brahms, he seems to regard music as an instrument of revelation and the role of the conductor as that of a divinely appointed interlocutor with Infinity.

"Der Freischuetz," even when new, was never more than a good piece of theatre projected through some inspired tunes. The tunes don't need a Furtwaengler to make them communicative, and his interference with them in this production made them a good deal less communicative than they naturally are.

"Don Giovanni," which Furtwaengler again conducted this season, is a strong enough piece to survive this sort of frustration of natural tempos and the spontaneously musical instincts of good singers. "Der Freischuetz" is not.

Of "Ariadne," staged by Josef Glieden and conducted by Karl Boehm, it may suffice to say that it was about as good a production of this opera as can well be imagined. Hilde Guden's Zerbinetta was the achievement of her career thus far, and Irmgard Seefried's Composer was a fitting companion. Indeed, everything about this production was most wonderfully first-rate—everything, that is, except the opera itself, which remains a shade short of Strauss' finest accomplishments.

The intellectual distillation that makes "Ariadne" inferior to "Salome" and "Elektra," the self-consciousness of its plan and articulation, were present far more conspicuously and far more disastrously in Mr. Liebermann's "Penelope."

This is a quite nicely planned little work. The idea of a modern Ulysses-Penelope drama offered as a projection into the future by the Penelope of the legend, as an extension, so to speak, of her ingenious tapestry, has been most



Irmgard Seefried, who sang in "Ariadne auf Naxos."

ingeniously realized. What results, however, is not so much a drama as a conception of a drama, presented with so many intellectual checks and balances that the audience's participation is consistently frustrated. If, indeed, encouraged at all.

This has been characteristic of many modern operas. It would almost seem as though composers were afraid to let themselves or their audiences become really identified with their characters. Enlightenment, not the emotional experience, seems to be the objective. What is offered is not passion but merely an image of passion, and it is offered pre-digested, as if for intellectual rather than emotional comprehension.

Non-Expressive

This may be because composers no longer dispose of a really expressive musical vocabulary. It may be that today's composers would not use one if they had it. The fact remains that modern opera, of which "Penelope" is a representative example, derives from the intellect and is aimed at the intellect.

Music, however, is an art of the emotions, and until composers can again find their own and their audiences' hearts, their operas will continue to bring up the rear at the ticket window.